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ABSTRACT

This document is the final report of the Instruction Committee of the Diablo Valley College (DVC) Faculty Senate on a two-phase study conducted to determine attitudes and practices relating to final examinations both at DVC and at community colleges throughout California. Phase one involved 275 DVC faculty in a survey of DVC Faculty Practice and Perceptions of Final Examinations. Phase two involved 98 Deans of Instruction in California community colleges in a Statewide Survey of Community College Final Examination Policies and Procedures. In both phases of the study, questionnaires were utilized; a 45% response rate in phase one and an 82.7% response rate in phase two were achieved. The majority of DVC faculty appeared satisfied with current final examination schedules and procedures although there was some notable dissent. Faculty comments on final examinations, pro and con, are included in the report. Phase two results indicated that conditions essentially similar to those at DVC exist throughout California community colleges. Dissent on the issue of final examinations was also similar to that at DVC and selected comments are included in the report. Although the problem of how best to evaluate students seems universal, consensus seems to favor some form of regular testing of student academic achievement. This report presents some alternatives and modifications recommended by the respondents. Survey instruments and summary data are attached. (JDS)

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Diablo Valley College
Pleasant Hill, California

Final Examinations: Policies and Practices at Diablo Valley College and Statewide

Final Report

William G. Preston, PhD
Director of Institutional Research

June 21, 1976

JC 760 505

Final Examinations: Policies and Practices
at Diablo Valley College and Statewide

Final Report

Introduction

Acting in response to concern over criticism and questions about current policies and procedures for final examinations, the Diablo Valley College Faculty Senate directed the Instruction Committee to investigate and to report its findings and recommendations. The Instruction Committee, in turn, requested the Research Office for assistance in determining attitudes and practices relating to final examinations both at this college and at community colleges throughout California.

The study that resulted was made in two phases: Phase I -- A Survey of DVC Faculty Practice and Perceptions of Final Examinations; and Phase 2 -- A Statewide Survey of Community College Final Examination Policies and Procedures. This is the final report of that study.

Phase I Results

Phase I was conducted during March and April of 1976 by means of a questionnaire that was distributed to the 275 regular faculty members of Diablo Valley College. One hundred twenty-four completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 45 percent. The findings were reported to the Instruction Committee on April 23, 1976 (Exhibit A).

In general, the results indicated that, while the majority of the faculty appeared to be satisfied with and observing current final examination schedules and procedures, there were some suggestions for change, and a few individuals questioned the validity and relevance of the whole examination concept and indicated that they did not observe it. Evidence of some internal faculty dissension on this point was revealed by pro and con comments, of which the following are typical:

-- "I feel greatly disadvantaged by faculty who do not give finals and fill students with reasons why all finals are bad."

-- "(Scheduling final examinations) can only be 'effective' in terms of satisfying those who advocate formal, competitive examinations administered and proctored, scored and 'graded' for the purpose of distributing letter-grades on a statistical basis . . . It is my understanding that the practice still exists in our setting simply as a result of now obsolete historical considerations . . . Outlaw it and take further steps to make sure class time cannot be used for this purpose."

-- "I get damn tired of hearing students say they either don't take a final or they take it at a time other than that for which it was scheduled--teacher convenience!"

-- "I think a final exam period is anti-education."

-- "The final exam period is often vital both educationally and for evaluation."

-- "I think it is ridiculous to give a final exam on course material because the good 'test-takers' do well and students with fear problems blank out . . . (students) do not learn from the final."

-- "I'm disturbed that so many instructors choose not to give finals. If anything goes on in a course, the 'final' is a good learning device--the reinforcement occurring is bound to be positive."

-- "I think that some instructors should show a little more integrity and not try phony practices that compromise the final examination time and its intention."

-- "When students tell you instructors are not giving exams, and you are, then they feel you are giving them extra work."

-- "Any student who works steadily all along the way should not be confronted by some ugly hurdle at the end. The whole concept is counter-educational."

-- "(The final examination) gives the student a real opportunity to spend two hours of 'directed-reflection' on a semester's work."

Phase 2 Results

For Phase 2 of the study, which was conducted during May and June of 1976, a questionnaire (Exhibit B) was sent to the Deans of Instruction of 98 California community colleges. (The three colleges in the Contra Costa Community College District were omitted). Eighty-one completed questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 82.7% percent, which is exceptionally good for this type of survey (Exhibit C).

From the answers to the survey questions (Exhibit D), it is apparent that final examination policies and procedures at a majority of community colleges throughout the State are essentially the same as those at Diablo Valley College; i.e., regularly scheduled during the last 1-2 weeks of the term, of about two-hours duration, and required by formally-stated college policy. There was less unanimity with regard to the allowance of a "break" between exams, with the time allowed ranging from none to two hours or more.

Comments made in response to the important question of faculty opinions and practices indicate that disagreements on the subject similar to those revealed at Diablo Valley College in the first phase of this study apparently are prevalent at many other institutions. Several colleges reported, however, that they exercise strict supervision of procedures by requiring all instructors to submit copies of final examination materials to the Office of Instruction or Division heads and requiring advance approval of any departures from the examination schedule. A few colleges, on the other hand, indicated a much more relaxed approach in allowing maximum flexibility to individual instructors in choosing the nature and timing of the term-end evaluation process.

The following are some typical comments of the survey respondents:

-- "Faculty, as a whole, find the current practice acceptable . . . The biggest problem with final examinations is their proportionate weight in the final grade."

-- "Considerable divergence of opinion (among faculty) . . . Final examinations should be an integral part of the curriculum."

-- "A questionable means of evaluating student achievement--should investigate other methods, although finals may serve some purpose."

-- "I think--particularly for transfer students--the two-hour final is a necessary part of the educational process. The way it is being handled by some faculty deprives the student of this experience and makes the faculty work load much lighter."

-- "General opinion (of faculty) seems in favor of exam. Students may never "put it all together' without the final exam."

-- "It appears, without research data to back it up, that each year more and more faculty members are not giving the traditional two-hour written final examination, but are giving (1) a one-hour final, (2) a 'hands-on' exam (where applicable), or (3) are doing as little as possible to satisfy the final exam requirement."

-- "Major factor is professional attitude of instructors. I don't believe in absolutes--some courses are better 'reviewed' by weekly exams or other processes (e.g., performance, attitude change, etc.)."

-- "We file final exams . . . Highly recommend finals be required of all classes."

-- "General reluctance (of faculty) to give finals in the traditional way."

-- "Final exams should be scheduled on a school-wide basis, and all faculty should be required to adhere to the schedule."

-- "Abolish a formal schedule of examinations. Evaluation is a continuous process. Each teacher must, therefore, be responsible for this process throughout the semester."

-- "(A final examination is) a complete learning experience--affords students an opportunity for a concentrated review, tying in much of the fragmented materials or ideas gained during the term. Need such experiences when advancing to upper division courses."

-- "I feel that a final evaluation should be given in every credit course. It need not be a formal evaluation nor necessarily during a scheduled time."

-- "We monitor and check off each teacher--EVEN P.E. TESTS . . . (Exams) should be given and teachers held to them with exceptions allowable by admin. agreement."

-- "We have enormous divergence in opinion and practice . . . I confess that the matter is something of a dilemma to me, and I haven't had time to study it--but I'm certain that we are quite inconsistent internally."

-- "I doubt if we can justify taking 3 or 4 days of instruction for finals when many (most?) instructors do not use the time."

Suggestions for changes in final examination policies and procedures were similar to those made by the DVC faculty. They included the following:

-- Provide time for a class meeting after the examinations to go over answers and to "pacify the troubled waters". (The experience of at least one respondent with this procedure, however, indicated that "Class attendance for discussion of exam results has been minimal.")

-- Allow more time between the last exam and the deadline for final grade submission.

-- Schedule final exams to coincide as closely as possible with the time and day of regular class meetings.

-- Accomplishment of modular criterion--referenced measures throughout the course would make final examinations necessary.

-- All instructors should be required to adhere to the examination schedule.

-- The Office of Instruction should require a copy of the final exam from every instructor.

-- Make final exams optional, depending on the nature of the course and the instructor's teaching style.

Conclusions

From the results of this study it is clearly evident that the problem of how best to evaluate student academic achievement is universal. Actual practice ranges from rigid adherence to conventional forms of final examinations and schedules to maximum flexibility in allowing individual instructors to follow their own inclinations. Each of these extreme positions has strong proponents and detractors both among faculty and institutions. The answer, however, seems to lie somewhere between; i.e., there should be some established form of evaluation of student achievement in each course of study; institutional policy should be flexible enough to allow the exact nature of the evaluation to be appropriate for the particular subject matter and teaching style; and the forms of evaluation chosen by instructors should be subject to regular review at the department and divisional levels and by the Instruction Committee to assure that consistency and academic standards are maintained from both disciplinary and institutional points of view.

Despite the opposition of some individuals who reject testing of any sort, the consensus of faculty and institutional respondents to this study seems to favor some form of regular testing of student academic achievement. Perhaps their justification for this point of view may be summed-up in the words of Robert L. Ebel:

> "If the use of educational tests were abandoned, the distinctions between competence and incompetence would become more difficult to discern. Dr. Nathan Womack, former president of the National Board of Medical Examiners, has pointed out that only to the degree to which educational institutions can define what they mean by competence, and determine the extent to which it has been achieved, can they discharge their obligation to deliver competence to the society they serve.

"If the use of educational tests were abandoned, the encouragement and reward of individual efforts to learn would be made more difficult. . . Decisions on important issues of curriculum and method would be made less on the basis of solid evidence and more on the basis of prejudice or caprice."*

* Robert L. Ebel, "The Social Consequences of Educational Testing," in Perspectives in Educational and Psychological Measurement, ed. by Glenn H. Bracht, et al (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 12-13.

Exhibit A

MEMORANDUM

TO: Virgil Woolbright
Chairperson, Instruction Committee

DATE: April 23, 1976

FROM: W. G. Preston

SUBJECT: Final Examination Survey

The recent survey of faculty practice and perceptions of final examinations resulted in return of 124 completed questionnaires out of the 275 which were distributed. This is a response rate of 45 percent, which is not optimal statistically, but is adequate I believe to yield some useful information.

The complete tabulation of the responses to each of the questionnaire items is attached. The following observations are based on a brief review of these results:

1. While the time scheduled for final examinations appears to be used for a variety of activities, a very large majority of the respondents indicated that they do give some form of examination during this period.

2. One hundred (80.6%) of the respondents felt that the two-hour time period for examinations is adequate. There were some qualifying comments, however, to the effect that the exact amount of time required is determined by the nature of the course and what use is made of the time. Several instructors indicated that they allowed students to work on their exams through the hour break between exams, and others complained about this practice as imposing an unfair burden on some students.

3. The most commonly used method of evaluating student achievement in courses appears to be written examinations, according to the respondents to this survey. In most instances, however, this method is used in conjunction with and supplemental to other evidence of student accomplishment. The methods used and the weight assigned to each is determined to a large extent by the nature of the subject matter and the style of instruction.

4. In determining a student's course grade, the survey respondents reported that they placed heaviest weight on the results of final examinations; semester reports, term papers, etc.; and summation of the results of tests given throughout the semester. The quality of work-books, journals, portfolios, and similar student-maintained materials also seemed to be important in situations where they are relevant to the subject matter.

5. Of the respondents who indicated that they give final examinations, almost three-quarters reported that they are comprehensive in nature.

(continued)

6. Almost 80 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the present system of setting aside time for final examinations. There were some rather strong opinions and complaints expressed, however, about instructors who do not use the time for purposes for which it presumably is intended or who do not follow the schedule exactly. Of particular concern to a few of the respondents are those instructors who give final exams during the final week of instruction (i.e., during the 16th week) and use the scheduled final exam time for review or for other purposes. The critics feel that this is unnecessarily disruptive of students' study plans and is an undesirable departure from the published and understood academic calendar.

7. In line with the preceding, there were relatively few suggestions for modifications of the existing system. Those that were made had to do primarily with allowing greater flexibility for instructors in the method and timing for evaluating students' course achievement; with the manner in which the finals schedule is established; and with the allowance of more time between the last scheduled exam and the deadline for submission of grades so that instructors can more thoroughly read and correct the exams and evaluate each student's overall accomplishments. In this connection, suggestions also were made that the final exam period be scheduled a week earlier to provide for a regular class session or two after the exams for review and discussion of the results.

If you have any questions or comments, or desire further assistance, please let me know.

WGP:sw

Attachment

cc: Instruction Committee

MEMORANDUM

TO: Faculty

DATE: March 10, 1976

FROM: Instruction Committee

SUBJECT: Survey of Faculty Practice and Perceptions of Final Examinations and Other Means of Measuring Student Course Achievement

At the request of the Faculty Senate Council, the Instruction Committee is attempting to evaluate the need for and the effectiveness of the final examination period that is set aside at the end of each semester. To this end, we are conducting a survey by means of the attached questionnaire to determine faculty practice and opinion relating to this subject.

Your participation in the survey is extremely important because we hope on the basis of the results to be able to make recommendations for possible improvements in the existing system and procedures.

Since the questionnaire is anonymous, in that respondents are not identified, please do not hesitate to express yourself freely and completely. Your answers will not be associated with you personally in any way.

We will appreciate your returning the completed questionnaire to Virgil Woolbright, Chairperson, Instruction Committee, by Friday, March 26, 1976.

WGP:sw

Attachment

Survey of Faculty Practice and Perceptions of Final Examinations and Other Means of Measuring Student Course Achievement

Responses: 124 out of 275 (45%)

Please answer the following questions by checking appropriate boxes and writing comments where indicated. If additional space for comments is needed, you may use the reverse sides of the pages or add sheets as necessary.

1. How do you use the time scheduled for final examinations each semester?

- [101] Give examinations
- [10] Distribute papers
- [20] Review test results
- [37] Discuss student performance and evaluation of the course
- [12] Other (please specify): Speeches or performances (5); take-home exam (3); as regular class period (4).

2. What is your opinion of the length of time (2 hours) that is presently reserved for final examinations?

[100] It is adequate. [13] It is excessive. [8] It is inadequate. [3] I have no opinion.

Comments or suggestions?: Adequacy depends on the type of course and the use made of the time.

3. In evaluating individual student achievement at the conclusion of courses you teach, which of the following methods do you use?

- [102] Written examination
- [12] Oral examination (including seminar-type discussion)
- [30] Report of semester project (term paper, etc.)
- [26] Student-maintained work-book, journal, portfolio, etc.
- [33] Other (please specify): Performance (8); Evaluation of all work (22); Manipulative skills (1); other (2).

4. In determining a student's course grade, what weight do you give to the following:

a. Final examination

[14] Heavy [86] Moderate [7] Little [6] None

b. Semester reports, term papers, etc.

[8] Heavy [51] Moderate [15] Little [13] None

c. Work-books, journals, portfolios, etc.

[11] Heavy [31] Moderate [7] Little [17] None

d. Other factors (please specify): Heavy: summation of tests (24); extra papers (2); individual development (6); performance (3); attitude (1); attendance (2) Moderate: summation of tests (22); attendance (10); performance (3); extra papers (1); completion of assignments (1). Little: attendance (5); summation of tests (1).

[38] Heavy [37] Moderate [6] Little [ ] None

5. If you give a final examination is it

[72] Comprehensive (covers material presented throughout the course)

[26] Cumulative (covers material for only the final segment of the course and the results are combined with those of tests given earlier for other segments)

[26] Other (please specify): Both comp. and cum. (10); synthesis of all work (4); course eval. (1); no answer (11).

6. What are your comments on the effectiveness of the present system of setting-aside time for final examinations each semester?

Satisfactory: 98

Unsatisfactory: 13

No opinion: 12.

7. What suggestions do you have for modification of the present system?

None (74); more options and flexibility (10); more time between last final and submission of grades (8); class time for review after final (6); have regular classes instead of special final week schedule (8); no final exams (5); schedule finals for TTh classes on Tues. or Thurs., etc. (4); require each instructor to post or publicize exam plan (3); no hour between exams (1); add another week for exams (1); allow more preparation time for instructors (1); eliminate "dead week" (1); allow more individual evaluations (1); use time for celebration (1).

Please return completed questionnaire to Virgil Woolbright, Chairperson, Instruction Committee, by Friday, March 26, 1976.

Note: Some very strong opinions appear to be held about instructors who use the final exam time in unorthodox ways or give no final exams. In the words of one respondent: "I feel greatly disadvantaged by faculty who do not give finals and fill students with reasons why all finals are bad."

Exhibit B

DIABLO VALLEY COLLEGE • PLEASANT HILL • CALIFORNIA

May 28, 1976

Dear Colleague:

Attached is a questionnaire which is being sent to all California community colleges to determine what current policies and procedures are with regard to the giving of final examinations. The results will be used to evaluate our own practices here at Diablo Valley College and, possibly, may provide helpful information for other colleges. Your assistance in completing and returning the questionnaire is very important, therefore, and will be greatly appreciated.

It is desirable that your response be sent to my office by June 11, 1976. A postage-paid envelope is enclosed for your convenience. If you wish a copy of the survey results, please check the box at the end of the questionnaire. In this connection, you can be assured that your college and responses will not be individually identified in the final report.

Sincerely,

William G. Preston

William G. Preston, PhD
Director of Research

WGP:sw

Attachment

DIABLO VALLEY COLLEGE

Survey of Final Examination Policies and Procedures

College Responding: _____

Instructions: For each of the following questions, please check the boxes and provide written explanations as appropriate. Please answer freely and completely, with the assurance that neither your college nor your responses will be identified individually in the final report of the survey results.

1. Does your college have a regularly scheduled period for final examinations?

☐ Yes ☐ No (skip to question 6)

2. If yes, when are they scheduled to be given?

☐ The last week of the term.

☐ Before the last week of the term (to allow for regular class meeting to discuss the exam results). Please explain: _____

_____

_____

☐ Other. Please explain: _____

_____

_____

3. How much time is allowed for each final examination?

☐ 1 hour ☐ 2 hours ☐ 3 hours

☐ Other. Please explain: _____

_____

_____

4. Do you allow for a "break" between each scheduled examination? (For example, at DVC finals are scheduled for two hours with a one-hour break between them.)

☐ Yes. Please explain: _____

_____

☐ No.

5. Are all instructors required to give some sort of final examination?

☐ Yes. What types (i.e., written, oral, performance, etc.)?

_____

_____

_____

☐ No.

SKIP TO QUESTION 7.

6. If you do not schedule a final examination period, what is your policy and procedure for end-of-term evaluation of student achievement?

☐ Instructors may use regular class sessions for examinations if they wish to give them.

☐ We have no established policy or procedure.

☐ Other. Please explain: _____

_____

_____

7. Do you have a formal written statement of your college's final examination policy?

☐ Yes (Please attach a copy, if possible.)

☐ No

8. Do you have any idea of the opinions and practices among your faculty with regard to final examinations? (At DVC, a recent survey of the faculty revealed considerable divergence of opinion and practice.)

☐ Yes. Please explain: _____

_____

_____

☐ No.

9. What comments and/or suggestions do you have regarding the giving of final examinations?

Thank you for your help. Please return the completed questionnaire to Dr. W. G. Preston at Diablo Valley College in the postage-paid envelope provided. If you wish a copy of the survey results, please check here. ☐

Exhibit C

Final Examination Study

Colleges Responding to the Phase 2 Survey

Allan Hancock
American River
Antelope Valley
Bakersfield
Barstow
Cabrillo
Canyons
Cerritos
Cerro Coso
Chabot
Chaffey
Citrus
Columbia
Crafton Hills
Cuesta
Cypress
De Anza
Desert
East Los Angeles
El Camino
Evergreen Valley
Feather River
Foothill
Fullerton
Gavilan
Grossmont
Hartnell
Imperial Valley
Lake Tahoe
Laney
Lassen
Long Beach
Los Angeles City
Los Angeles Harbor
Los Angeles Mission
Los Angeles Southwest
Los Angeles Trade-Tech.
Los Angeles Valley
Mendocino
Merced
Modesto
Monterey Penninsula
Moorpark
Mt. San Antonio
Mt. San Jacinto
Napa
Ohlone
Orange Coast
Palomar
Palo Verde
Pasadena
Porterville
Redwoods
Reedley
Rio Hondo
Riverside
Sacramento
Saddleback
San Bernardino Valley
San Diego City
San Diego Evening
San Diego Mesa
San Francisco
San Joaquin Delta
San Mateo
Santa Ana
Santa Barbara
Santa Monica
Santa Rosa
Sierra
Siskiyous
Skyline
Solano
Southwestern
Taft
Victor Valley
West Hills
West Los Angeles
West Valley
Yuba
Marin

Exhibit D

Final Examination Study

Results of Phase 2: Survey of Community Colleges Statewide

No. of Colleges Surveyed: 98
No. of Responses Received: 81
Response Rate: 82.7%

Responses to Questions

1. Regularly Scheduled Finals?

   Yes: 100.0% No: 0

2. When Scheduled?

   Last 1-2 weeks: 97.5%
   Before last week: 2.5%

3. Time Allowed?

   1 hour: 0
   2 hours: 70.4%
   2 1/2 hours: 9.9%
   2 3/4 hours: 1.2%
   3 hours: 17.3%
   Reg. class period: 1.2%

4. Break Between Exams?

   1/4 hour: 8.6%
   1/2 hour: 22.2%
   3/4 hour: 1.2%
   1 hour: 17.3%
   2 hours: 8.6%
   Other: 6.2%
   None: 35.8%

5. Instructors Required to Give Exams?

   Yes: 84.0% No: 16.0%

7. Formal Policy Statement?

   Yes: 65.4% No: 32.1% No Resp.: 2.5%

8. Idea of Faculty Opinions and Practices:

   Yes: 58.0% No: 38.3% No Resp.: 3.7%

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OCT 29 1976

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